

#217 JOHN WASHLICK: CIVILIAN

**John Martini (JM):** Today is December 5, 1991. This is an oral history tape with Mr. John Washlick. On December 7, 1941, Mr. Washlick was twenty-two years of age, a civilian employee of the Pearl Harbor Naval yard. He was a chipper and caulker, but he was called out to assist in the rescue of men trapped in the upturned battleship, USS *OKLAHOMA*. My name is John Martini. This tape is being done in conjunction with the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, and television station KHET in Honolulu. And thanks for coming, Mr. Washlick.

**John Washlick (JW):** Oh, you're quite welcome. My pleasure.

JM: How did you get involved with working for the Naval shipyard in Pearl Harbor?

JW: Well, at nineteen years old, I was an apprentice boilermaker on the railroad, to build the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. And I could see the handwriting on the wall that steam locomotive was on its way out. They were going to diesel, so I put an application into Philadelphia Navy Yard, for a boiler making job. And I got a reply asking me if I would for the Pearl Harbor. Well, to me, nineteen year old kid in a South sea islands, that sounded great. So I jumped at the opportunity.

JM: Do you remember what they were going to pay you?

JW: Yeah, sixty-eight cents an hour.

JM: Several hours . . .

JW: So I, I don't remember it, but I was told that at the time my parents were against it and my friend that I traveled with and later became my brother-in-law, was talking to me recently, and he remember the day I left, when they were, how they tried to persuade me not to go. And my father had said, "You're going to get into trouble. That's going to be the first place gets into the war."

And I said, I don't remember it, but he said it's the honest truth. And I know he tried to talk me out of it, but I wanted to go to Hawaii.

JM: What year would that have been?

JW: Pardon?

JM: What year would that have been?

JW: That would have been about June of 1941.

JM: And you arrived here and you probably lived in a certain part of the area, that had . . .

JW: Yeah, I reported to Mare Island for transportation. And then I left Mare Island on the USS *WARDEN*, *HENDERSON*, *HENDERSON*. And I think it took around twenty-seven days to get here in them days. And they unloaded us at the dock, in the yard.

JM: Right in the naval . . .

JW: In the Navy yard. We boarded trucks and they took us out of the old road that ain't there now to the Kapu U.S. Naval [*Containment*], naval housing.

JM: The what?

JW: Kapu U.S. Naval [*Containment*].

JM: Why did you think it was called Kapu?

JW: Well, they had a big sign out front, so I wrote home, I says, "Mom, I'm living at Kapu U.S. Naval [*Containment*]."

And then later I find out that kapu means "keep out." So I had to write home and, "Mom, take the Kapu off."

JM: But what was the nickname that that area had?

JW: Well, they called it Boys' Town. They called it the Green Gables. And we had a play hall there that made in the national news. They had the best card games around. Make all that money, exchange.

JM: Do you remember what you were doing on the morning of December 7?

JW: Yeah. I don't hesitate to say I get up early to go to Mass, 'cause I always go to my Mass. And my routine was Sunday to get up, shower, go to the mess hall, have breakfast, and walk through the cane field to a little mission church. That little white building that ain't there now. And that particular morning, I had a suit on, I was ready to go to Mass when I got the news.

JM: How did you hear about the attack?

JW: As we were wondering what was going on, one guy hollers out, "They want everybody down the yard." He had an open dump truck.

And my recollection is that we got right onto the truck. Sunday, going to Mass clothes or what. And I don't recall how many, but I think about six or eight of us went in the dump truck.

JM: Did, did you know, aside from what he told you, could you hear or see anything that was going on?

JW: Oh, they were, they were strafing. In fact, Boys' Town was getting strafed. I think there was -- if my, my recollection, a couple of them bullets went through the barracks they had been in. I recollect being told, you know, that our barracks had been hit, but I was out of the barracks when it had happened.

And you could see the smoke. It's, the first wave had already come in. And this guy putting us on the alert, I don't even know who he was. All I know is he had that dump truck, because as we were going down the road, it went from the Navy [*Containment*], past Hickam Field, they were strafing Hickam Field. And they were coming out of the strafing run, and they were going over the

road, you know, and one went over the dump truck. In fact, he even gave a wave as he swung back to go over the yard.

And I didn't see it, but I had heard that he had got shot down. That a couple of 'em were shot down in that area of the yard.

JM: Did, did you know whose planes they were?

JW: Yeah. We thought they were ours. We thought that something went wrong, that, "What's going on? Wait 'til they hear about this back home."

The Japanese couldn't be doing it. I mean, even, by then, we could see the meatball. But immediately after that, we did, we saw the big emblem, with the meatball on the side of the plane. And we still couldn't believe it, because there's no way the Japanese could get in there. Dawn patrol was going out every morning. Two submarines, two destroyers, PBVs. What's going on?

And then when the ships started blowing and, and then, we're, it's Japanese. In fact, the talk before the war, up in the Black Cat, the Sailors and the Marines and the Soldiers, right? There was talk, you know, that things didn't look good. "Don't worry about it. One month to get over there. One month to kick their butt. One month to come back. You know, they can't sight down a rifle. They can't fly airplanes."

JM: That's what they were saying about the Japanese?

JW: That was the feeling. So it couldn't be Japs. So anyhow, the truck went through the main gate, into the yard and dropped us off at number one dry dock. And the first real scare I got, is as soon as I got out of the truck, I saw a big ball of flame go up from number one dry dock. That's the one that took a hit right through the galley, right through mid-ships. And then that number one dry dock went to *PENNSYLVANIA*, it was the *CASSIN* and the *DOWNES*, two destroyers. They were on blocks. They throw 'em off the blocks into one another. And they went up in flames. And then the dock was getting flooded, and I'm hiding underneath a gentry crane. And somebody's hollering, "Get up to the shop! Get up to the shop!"

So we run up to shop eleven and I remember cowering behind a wall, around the office, inside the shop. And we hear the explosions and we hear the commotion. We don't know what's going on. We're down behind a concrete wall. And my leader man, Lefty DeCastro, maybe six or eight of us, maybe ten. I really don't know now, a group of us. Lefty DeCastro says, "Get torches. Get as many tanks of acetylene as you can get. There's sailors alive on the *OKLAHOMA*. We got to get over to the *OKLAHOMA*."

JM: At this point, so you're, basically, you're hiding and stuffs, you know, flying all over the place?

JW: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. We, yeah, you're not scared but you're confused, you know. It was, "What's," you know, "what's going on and how far can this go? What's happening."

You didn't see that the *OKLAHOMA* was upside down in the mud, and you didn't see the *ARIZONA* was going down, and you didn't see the *NEVADA* was

grounded. You didn't see what was going on, you just heard the noise, you know, and how far can they go?

JM: Can, can you describe that noise, 'cause a lot of people comment on it? What was that like?

JW: The only way, the best way I can describe it, and this is fifty years, but I, I know the feeling we had. The feeling was that I think there was so much going on, you just, you didn't give a thought to what was or is going to be, or where you're at or what. It was just like time stopped, like. You know, I can't describe it, because I know we got the hoses, we got the torches and we -- I'm assuming we needed to get transportation, because ten-ten dock might have been a hundred yards from the ship. We got down to ten-ten dock and we got into a Navy launch. And we went out to the side of the ship.

Now, I guess the word of the story was I just, no medal for Joe. There was a Navy crew out there burning a hole in the, in the *OKLAHOMA*. The Navy, they had enough on their hands getting men out of the water, and, and trying to fight with what they had. I think he was confused. This was Lefty DeCastro, and I know I was with him when we kicked the plate in and the smoke came billowing it. And you could still hear the tapping. (Tapping sound.)

JM: You, so you got on a launch at ten-ten deck for transport over . . .

JW: Over to the *OKLAHOMA*, then we went up over the hull. It looked like a veil on the water, and we burnt a hole. Now, the Reader's Digest says that when Joe Blow come over with the air hammers, and the, that maybe I burned a hole to kick the plate in, and it was like Joe got a little confused on it. This is the first, the first of us over, about six or eight of us, Lefty DeCastro. When he saw that the hull was lined with cork and caught fired, and caused this smoke, he right away shut the torches off. No more burning.

JM: Can I, can I go back for a sec?

JW: Yeah.

JM: When you first got on the *OKLAHOMA*, you were the first people to actually start cutting on her, right?

JW: Yeah, cut the hull.

JM: How'd you know where to cut?

JW: Good question. We had a Navy Ensign with us. He was a superintendent of the hulls. I got his name in my literature. And we had Lefty DeCastro, and we got a picture of him in that paper, and he got his name. Lefty DeCastro knew them ships like he knew the fingers on his hand, and he had a lot of arthritis in them fingers. But he knew where the cofferdams were, where the fresh water dam, the fresh water tank would be, where the oil tank would be. He knew that ship. If it wasn't for Lefty DeCastro, none of them men would have got out of there, in my, my opinion, my belief. And Lefty DeCastro did get a lot of credit for it, deservedly. And I have 'em asking me even now, today, if I know the whereabouts or the condition of Lefty DeCastro. I don't assume he's here. He was much older than I was.

He ordered no more torches.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JW: . . . over to the yard, just bring out an air compressor, air hoses, and air hammers. And it was when the barge come over with the compressor that eight or ten more men came.

JM: When, when he first cut through, there was cork inside and that . . .

JW: It all was lined with cork. It caught fire, and when we kicked that plate in, making the last cut, the smoke just blew right out in our face.

JM: What, what . . .

JW: The cork burning.

JM: Burning. Was it, could you hear guys inside while you were cutting? Could you hear 'em rapping?

JW: We could hear 'em tapping.

JM: Were you right over where they were?

JW: We were one bulkhead away from where they were. Of course, we're coming to that now. When the, they even sent for blowers to the blow the smoke. But when we got into the hull when we could stand it, you can hear 'em tapping. Before we got into the hull, even so we were in when the smoke's coming. We could hear 'em tapping. That's why I say I think we suffocated them with the smoke and the torch.

JM: How?

JW: Because they cut a hole in the bulkhead, and I remember going in because I remember they were sitting up against the bulkhead with a flashlight. This is why I didn't give an interview. Maybe there's certain people who don't like to hear this. They had a flashlight right between 'em, and I thought they were unconscious, and I had them out. After the second one got out and I got out, and we're moving to another compartment. They were the only two there. I asked, I don't know if it was Lefty or who I asked, "How do you think they are?"

He said, "They're dead. They're dead."

Now, I think it's beneficial for it to be written up that thirty-two alive and two dead, they were the first two reached. And it was our belief that -- because we heard 'em tapping. They were alive. And so I believed that there was no work on the compartment, they didn't drown, and we think we suffocated 'em.

JM: What, with the smoke?

JW: Smoke. Now, I think this is when Joe BOL-DO come over, with the, with the air compressor and the air hammers. And like I mentioned, he had the big -- and I know the name of it, because I had the same impression. He had the

impression that he was a big man and he used a big hammer. It was two arms. And (mumbles) the big one and the Fuller one, the little one, and I was a little guy. That was my size. And I used to have big eyes, "Can we use that big old hammer for? It's the one that does the work. I don't want my arm to do it, the hammer's doing it."

And I used to always carry the big Ingersoll Rand hammer too. But Joe BOL-DO was, must have been in the group that got, I think it was twenty-something taking what I think at that time was what they called the lucky bag. 'Cause he refers in this story about the one end of the compartment and having to get on his back to get out. Now, I don't recall that, so it was not my group. He must have been in the other group. 'Cause I was on the, with Lefty, and we got the first two, like I said, dead, and we got the last two. Because the last two, the two that we got out alive, I remember Lefty hollering to 'em to keep calm and hear 'em hollering that the water is coming above our neck and you hear the air blowing out. As we'd heat some, we cut a hole, it would lead air out and the water would come up. And I don't know how deep down we were.

But he's holding (mumbles) over it, you know, "Is anybody injured? Get them out first. How many of you?"

"There's two of us."

So we bust the last ones and I reached down and I pulled this one guy up, and all you see is his eyeballs. He's got only skivy shorts on and he's covered with oil, from the top to the step of his toes. Then the other one, same way. And I happened to have one, hold of one, pulled him up, that I answered the question he put to us, "What happened?"

They were below decks. They thought the ship blew up. I said, "The Japs bombed you."

He got real excited and started flailing around. Sort of thought we're joking. "What the hell are you trying to tell me?"

And the rest were there, two or three of us were there, "Yeah, yeah, that's right, the Japs bombed you."

And we got him out. Twenty minutes to three, Tuesday morning.

JM: Tuesday morning, so that . . .

JW: Tuesday morning, twenty minutes to three, Tuesday morning.

JM: So that would be over forty-eight hours.

JW: That's right. From fighting and the *OKLAHOMA* took the first hit, one of the first hits of the action. Now at 8:40, 8:55, or 7:55, I think they had already taken the torpedo, five minutes to eight, as soon as it started. Talked to a couple of *OKLAHOMA* guys, they claimed they took three torpedoes almost in succession. And I think in total they took about nine. And then I even heard of one that they retrieved after they brought the *OKLAHOMA* up, they had one off. So I mean, I think it was ten minutes. I heard fifteen minutes, it rolled over and went down. But I also read an account where in eight minutes it capsized.

JM: Can you go into some detail about when you got the second group of guys out, the ones that you pulled out, you know, two and a half days, or two and a half . . .

JW: Twenty minutes to three, Tuesday morning, right.

JM: What was the, what was the procedure that you went through to cut through the hull? I mean, it's not just one sheet of metal. Isn't it a double hull?

JW: Well, we're, no, we're beyond the hull now and we're down, I don't know how many feet down, in the compartments.

JM: So you had already cut through the . . .

JW: Yeah, I don't know how deep we were. Yeah, we went through the double bottom of the hull.

JM: How, how did you, what tools did you use? You mentioned the big ING-ER saw. How did you cut through the outer hull with those big hammers? Just like a can opener?

JW: Before the war started, in fact before Pearl Harbor, the armor on the battleships went so far below water. 'Cause them torpedoes set, can navigate deep enough to go under the armor.

JM: They thought.

JW: They also thought they could have tile in the, in the heads. And that all come up. That come up in them, toward the SAN-LYE-ZER, and planking on the deck. More men were killed with the splinters of wood and the tile, and also when the sailor has nothing to do, send him out on the boat, sit there and paint the ship. The ship is gone for three months, but layer after layer of paint. There was no more wooden planking on the ships, and no more tile, and they, every time a ship needs a paint, they got out there and they, and they chip the old paint off. They weren't bad.

Same with the armor plate. The armor plate went so low. The Japanese knew how far it went, and their torpedoes went a little lower. They went right up under the armor. When that ship rolled over and the bottom was exposed, that was below the armor. I mean, it ain't like we had to go through a foot of armor plating. Here we had maybe one inch of steel. And that's why we thought acetylene torches. But then when we went the hard way, the acetylene torch could be dangerous, even to blow ammunition, if that started a fire. We had chisels. We had gouges. And we had diamond point cutters. And we also would not take our thumb off that trigger. My arm is about to go broke, go numb. I kept my thumb on, and the guy slipped his thumb over mine. We had to keep the noise going, let them know that we're not giving up and we are there.

JM: Was it the trigger on the big hammer . . .

JW: Yeah, on the trigger of that air hammer, to keep that hammer going. But if I stopped and I moved my equipment into your command, just only for moments or minutes, these guys are not hearing that noise, they could panic, you know. It's hard on 'em. So Lefty DeCastro, it was his decision, "Don't let that

hammer stop. You're arm's giving out on you, let somebody get in there and slip right on it."

And we worried about the air coming out. Now, like these two, they were hanging in there, water up to their armpits, and by the time we got them through that, got that house broke, got 'em out, the air is blowing out from where our tool's cutting. If the water is coming at you, coming up to their face, and they're getting excited. And Lefty's, "Keep calm, keep calm, keep calm. We're going to have you in two minutes, two seconds, three seconds, you're out."

And they, and like I say, when they came out, you just see eyeballs, and they're all covered slick with oil. From five minutes to eight Sunday morning. So they slid her through the holes we got in the bulkhead, and they get out, they get up on topside, and we come out behind 'em. We were up on topside. And as far as I recall, that's when we got in the launch and we left the ship. I thought we gave up, that we are no more, nodding. I really count (mumbles). They did stay out there a couple more days, in case. I think a Navy crew stood by.

But there was another incident of a man tapping, trapped in the *TENNESSEE*. That was over in the yard. And they built a cofferdam there, to get down there, and I was on duty that night when we tried to get -- this is a week after the attack, days. And I could still hear the tapping.

JM: The *TENNESSEE* or the *WEST VIRGINIA*?

JW: *TENNESSEE*. *WEST VIRGINIA* was on Battleship Row. This *TENNESSEE* I'm speaking of is around by sub base, near where they had the docks. If my recollection is right, and yet I can't see a battleship over there. But I know -- and if there was a guy trapped on the *TENNESSEE*, and they had this cofferdam, steel casing. They pumped the water, 'cause I worked on it one night. When I got relieved to go off, they were still working, and I heard they got into it that day, Tuesday.

JM: When . . . . You know those two guys were in there?

JW: Yeah.

JM: And you're going after 'em. You've already, you've already lost two of 'em on the first attempt.

JW: Oh yeah.

JM: What, what was the, what did the crew feel like? Did you feel you were going to lose them, or were you confident that you could get to these two?

JW: Nah, we never had confidence. And us, in the group, doing it, chipping and cutting, and the work, we didn't even think. DeCastro did all the thinking for us. All we worried was to keep that hammer going, keep it going. But he was there guiding us, he was our leader. And he was the one that talked and was shouting to 'em. And, "Keep calm. Don't breathe. Hold your breath. Don't get excited."



Oh yeah. And, and as we're, as the, more of these going on, you hear, you hear, "Ssst." He's holding his hand over it. And he's, "The water is coming, the water is coming up on 'em." We don't know how high it's coming, but like I say, when we pulled 'em out, they were so covered with oil that we know that they just about had their head in there.

JM: So, so when you guys would cut through the hull, you weren't right over 'em. You had to get into the inner hull and then find out where they were from there?

JW: Oh yeah. Yeah. See, I didn't, yeah, we were looking for a coffer dam as the water . . .

JM: Right.

JW: . . . displaced between tanks, that we could get into the ship and then when we hit, like I said, it was morning. One time I think they did hit a fresh water. We must have hit. I remember Lefty DeCastro tasting it, with his fingers. "Oh, it's fresh. It's fresh, fresh water."

But that first incident, that thing was only full of smoke. And then when we got cleared out enough, we can get in and we cut a hole in the bulkhead, and we were right directly -- the bulkhead, this side of the bulkhead, right in front of them. We got 'em pretty quick, after we got in, the first two.

JM: You must have had a whole lot of work ahead of you, after, after that. I mean, putting the whole fleet back together, for the months following?

JW: Like ten hours a day, six days a week, fourteen hours a day, maybe. Working at nights, you go in like -- I got in late afternoon, I worked 'til the next morning or something like that. You see, that's what was confusing about it. Before that attack, I only worked, you know, when daylight's coming, in the area, PBYS going out, went that way, went that way. And here's the destroyers, "Shoop, shoop, shoop, shoop." Two submarines, dawn patrol. No way the Japs get in there. They can't do it. But they got in.

JM: How do you feel, fifty years later, looking back at what you did in those days and hours?

JW: Well, I tell you, I feel like it was a highlight in my fifty years of working. And I often wondered, I mean, they're alive, and I'm good, I'm glad to hear they are. I heard there's three or four of 'em out here today, and I can't keep in touch with 'em. And I also had a phone call last week, a name right here -- that's all I got, is his name. I've been telling Randy Cunningham, the Congressman from San Diego. I tried to get the commemorative medal, and they, "No, it's only for service men."

So I had to go down to his office, make the application, he's going to push it. He says, or his secretary, she says, "Well, even if they don't give it to every employee, at least the twenty, that leaves, what, eight, ten, twelve?"

So while reading it, I said, "Here's the guy right here. I didn't even know it. Walter Staff, the last one off the *OKLAHOMA*."

She picked up the phone, I said, "Hey, hey, whoa, it's fifty years ago."

And she got him on the phone. She handed me the phone and I talked to him. I talked to him from the Congressman's phone for like an hour. "Yeah, I'm coming over the fifth!"

I said, "I'm going over the fourth."

"I'm going to be at the tour, tower, which is our hotel," but I can't find it.

So I thought I'll find him down here at Sheraton, but there's no *OKLAHOMA* guys down here. There's guys from Oklahoma. I talked to 'em Wednesday night. He said, "Nah, we're over here on our own," you know, "the Oklahoma association is not here as a group, you know, with headquarters."

So I want to contact him tomorrow, or be able to get in touch with him. I told him where I was and obviously I want to find this TA-RA Hotel, or whatever it is, and maybe get to meet him. Salt Lake City.

JM: Would like to be there when you do. Thank you for coming, Mr. Washlick.

JW: Fifty years, seems like five years ago. Yeah. And old Kapu Navy [*Containment*] ain't there. I come out on the fortieth, and I went down to visit the yard and the gate wasn't there. They removed the gate around the sub base, Pearl Harbor, Pearl City side. I wanted to get an invite then. I wrote a letter about a week ago to the first officer, asked permission to visit the shop. And I remember at the time, I needed a reply so I told him what hotel I'm at. Maybe before I leave I'll get an invite to go down and look around.

JM: Maybe I can give you a hand.

JW: Hah?

JM: Maybe I can give you a hand.

JW: That's why I mentioned it.

(Laughter)

JM: Thank you.

JW: My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW